

The AIDS Crisis at South African Universities

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In the next few weeks the new school year will begin across South Africa's college campuses. Sadly, many of our students will not return from the summer recess. Lack of money is the most frequent explanation. The real reason may be AIDS.

South Africa's only survey of HIV prevalence among college students, done at the University of Durban-Westville a year ago, revealed infection rates of 26 percent in women and 12 percent in men aged 20 to 24. Those findings are consistent with the latest numbers from UNAIDS, which last month reported that a quarter of South African women in their 20s carries the virus that causes AIDS.

Appalling statistics

As educators, we are appalled and frustrated by these statistics. Appalled because HIV/AIDS is preventable. Frustrated because the students emerging from our universities today are among the first to be educated after apartheid's demise. They have been exposed throughout their formative years to new democratic ideals. South Africa desperately needs their skills and growing tolerance.

Few of us can bear to admit that a substantial proportion of our students are fatally infected. We are asked to excuse absences and offer counseling for circumstances beyond our professional and emotional comprehension. We also fear our students will increasingly be deprived of family and financial support. Many of their parents already are dying of AIDS; for many more, having HIV carries the stiff penalty of ostracism.

AIDS prevention

Had South Africa begun AIDS prevention campaigns such as those Uganda launched in the 1980s, our students would face brighter futures. But the apartheid government viewed the disease as a black problem. Although the African National Congress showed initial concern in the early 1990s, it ultimately failed to mobilize the public. Some 4.5 million South Africans now have HIV, and that number is climbing so fast that our leaders often seem dumbstruck by the incalculable costs and social complexity of this catastrophic epidemic.

The majority of South Africans is under the age of 25 and accounts for over 60 % of the new HIV infections. Most are too young to remember apartheid, but its legacy of broken communities and dysfunctional families impedes AIDS prevention. Girls face intense pressures to have sex at an early age. Sex education remains a social taboo. Gender differences in infection rates strongly suggest that men in their late 20s and early 30s spread the disease among teenage girls.

Top priority

Changing sexual behaviour must become the top national security priority. In this, students have a key role to play. Credible young leaders can be found at all of South Africa's 36 tertiary institutions. In communities that still stigmatize AIDS, students are often among the first to break the silence.

Students on our campus have created the '[Get a Life](#)' website, which links student councils across the county and elsewhere in Africa in a dialogue about AIDS. There are also signs of a spiritual revival on campus. Islamic students are at the forefront of AIDS awareness campaigns. We hope that their Christian and Jewish peers will join them, with strong backing from religious leaders.

Role of governments

Governments in Africa and beyond can do much to match this student commitment. During the early days of the Cold War, Washington covertly financed the International Student Association. Bipartisan support can and should be raised in Congress to create special scholarships for AIDS orphans and students at the forefront of AIDS education and prevention campaigns.

US colleges and non-governmental organizations that helped train and protect future South African leaders during the struggle against apartheid should now engage on a similar scale in response to AIDS. Special programs for historically disadvantaged students, including opportunities to study abroad, could contribute to a youth-driven international AIDS prevention campaign.

Entertainment industry

Finally, the US entertainment industry must accept its responsibilities. The sounds and symbols of American popular culture pervade South Africa. Sex and violence in American films, television series, and rap lyrics glamorize dangerous behaviour while ignoring the consequences.

South Africans inspired the world by their peaceful overthrow of apartheid. Outsiders played a role in that success. Without an even greater national and international commitment now against AIDS, the fragile hope of a new era of African peace and prosperity will be quickly dashed. We fear for our students — and ourselves.

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